ADDRESS

OF THE

BRITISH CONVENTION.

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THE

ADDRESS

OF THE

BRITISH CONVENTION,

ASSEMBLED AT

EDINBURGH,

NOVEMBER 19, 1793,

TO THE

PEOPLE OF GREAT BRITAIN.

LONDON:

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BRITISH MUSEUM

ADDRESS

OF THE

BRITISH CONVENTION, &c.

WE THE DELEGATES OF THE BRITISH CONVENTION, ſtating the claims, feeling the intereſts, and expreſſing the will of thouſands of our fellow-citizens, addreſs you, at this awful and momentous criſis, in the cauſe of our country, in the cauſe of freedom, and of ſuffering humanity. As members of the ſame government, deriving the ſame rights under the ſame title, we claim your patient hearing, and diſpaſſionate deciſion.

We know, and we reſpect the tribunal to which we appeal, and therefore have every thing to hope,

and nothing to fear from the judgment which you ſhall paſs. That tribunal, compoſed of the underſtanding and diſintereſted men of this great nation, will pronounce, without flattery, and without fear, the decree of juſtice to the preſent age, and to poſterity; we therefore look forward, with an honeſt confidence, to the approbation of mankind, who, from the purity of our conduct, will ultimately decide upon the rectitude of our intentions, and the ſincerity of our hearts.

The nineteenth day of November, the day on which the Britiſh Convention firſt met at Edinburgh, will form a pleaſing and memorable epoch, not only in the hiſtory of our country, but in the hiſtory of the human mind. Thoſe hands which the common Father of us all had formed to be united in the bonds of friendſhip and of peace, but which the wicked policy of governments had too often bathed in innocent blood, were now extended to raiſe our drooping country, and to claſp each other in the embraces of a brotherly affection. Nor was the object of our Convention more praiſe-worthy, than the principle was legitimate:—reſpecting even the prejudices of the good; earneſtly wiſhing to promote the welfare, without diſturbing the peace of our country; and anxious to guard againſt the imputation of *novelty*, among the

records

records of former times, and in the eſtabliſhed uſages of our anceſtors, we ſought for precedent, and we found it. In the inſtitutions of Alfred, that patriot king who approached as nearly to perfection as human nature will permit, we diſcovered the guide and ſanction of our conduct. In thoſe golden days, as they have been emphatically called, the annual meeting of all *freemen* was an acknowledged part of our venerable conſtitution. Among them was placed the king himſelf, as the common father of a family, whoſe duty it was to hear their wrongs and to redreſs them, to appeaſe their murmurs, by executing the offices of a vigilant magiſtrate, and to court the affections of his people, as the moſt ſolid ſupport of his throne. From this judicious organization of the whole country, a common ſympathy was excited, a quick ſenſibility to their mutual ſufferings was diffuſed, and the hand of juſtice was as readily ſtretched out to chaſtiſe guilt and protect innocence, as the tongue of the oppreſſed was eager to claim it.

Theſe meetings were not clouded by tumultuous diſputation, nor in them are to be found any traces of folly or caprice. Violations of law were rare, becauſe all felt a pride to obey, and an intereſt to preſerve, what the underſtandings of all had

conceived, and the will of all had combined to enact.

THIS CONSTITUTION, which the wiſdom of our anceſtors erected on the deep and broad foundation of a primitive integrity, and which, even in theſe days, ambitious and deſigning men have held up, not as the object of a rational admiration, but as the image of a blind and idolatrous worſhip, has long been mouldering in decay, and is now tottering to its fall.—While this conſtitution ſtood, it diffuſed around it the bleſſings of freedom, and produced a ſtate of happineſs and ſecurity, which the condition of human nature ſeems ſcarcely capable of exceeding. But a dark cloud ſoon overſhadowed this fair portion of the globe. The daring hand of a Norman robber defaced the beautiful edifice, which had given equal ſhelter to the peaſant and the prince.

On the invaſion of the firſt William, the tree of feudality was planted in our iſland, the bitter fruits of which we are taſting at this day; and his deſcendants, through a ſucceſſion of years, continued to cruſh its miſerable inhabitants under the weight of their iron ſceptre.

The

The voracious claims of the crown, ſupported by armed bands of foreigners, had nearly ſwallowed up the rights of the people, who had now become as duſt in the balance, and whoſe intereſts were never promoted, nor their will conſulted, except when they were called on to join the ſtandard of deſpotiſm, and to ſhed their blood in the proſecution of wars, which the deſtructive ambition of their kings had excited. The human mind neglected, uncultivated, and depreſſed, ſunk into a ſtate of profound ignorance, and abject ſlavery. But this ſtate endured not long—nor is it conſiſtent with the condition of our being that it ſhould. The love of freedom is as inſeparable from our nature, as the life-blood which flows from the heart.—It is that imperiſhable ſpark in the boſom of man, which time may ſmother, but which eternity cannot extinguiſh.

The ſpell was ſoon broken. In the reign of John, a Meeting or CONVENTION OF THE BARONS, SUPPORTED BY THE PEOPLE, aſſembled on the plains of Runnemede, and demanded and obtained the GREAT CHARTER OF OUR LIBERTIES.—This charter was not an innovation, but a partial revival of the violated rights of our anceſtors. The People, indeed, ſtill groaned under enormous oppreſſions,

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nor did they regain thoſe privileges, nor that *political power*, which the generous code of Alfred had conferred. But the people, in all ages, have been more patient to endure, than prone to act; and governments have rarely loſt the obedience of the ſubject, until they have ceaſed to deſerve it.

For many years, the hiſtory of England preſents only a dark and confuſed picture of fierce diſputants, of princes aſſerting their dubious claim to the crown, ſeeking the ſupport and extending or abridging the liberties of the people, as it ſuited the views of their perſonal ambition, and to whom, as in latter days, the ancient conſtitution of theſe realms was but a muſty record, except only upon ſuch occaſions, when the *name* was to be brought forward as a bait for popularity. Over theſe ſcenes, for the credit of our country, and even of our nature, let reaſon aud humanity combine to throw a veil;—ſince the men who ſhould govern, not the manner of the government, was the object of contention, while the ſcaffold and the field alternately reddened with the blood of the people, who are the only lawful fountain, as well as the only ſolid ſupport of political inſtitutions.

Soon after the acceſſion of the houſe of Stuart, (a period grateful to the hearts of Britons, as it was diſ-

diſtinguiſhed by the happy union of our countries!) when civil liberty was aſſailed by the claims of *prerogative*, and when the ſacred rights of conſcience, which God gave, and which man cannot ſurrender, were oppreſſed by the perſecutions of an inſolent hierarchy; a Meeting, or CONVENTION OF THE PEOPLE OF ENGLAND, SCOTLAND AND IRELAND, uniting in a firm and patriot phalanx, rallied round the altars of freedom and religion, which they reſolved to preſerve, or to be buried under their ruins. At that memorable æra, the union of the people ſaved the liberties of our country. Now, when *corruption* is ſapping the foundations of public ſecurity, let the ſame union, and the ſame ſpirit, enable us to preſerve our ſacred inheritance, and while we remember the virtues, let us not diſgrace the memory of our anceſtors.

Nor were their immediate deſcendants unworthy of their ſires.—They imitated the wholeſome example which was ſet them, and when the infatuated James, clad, as he vainly conceived himſelf to be, in the immunities of irreſponſibility, reſting his claims on *divine right*, and ſeeking to convert the maxim, that *kings can do no wrong*, into the deſtruction of that ſociety for whoſe uſe even kings were created, the feelings and reaſon of the people,

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ple, rouſed by a ſenſe of ſelf-preſervation, broke through the narrow principles of *law*, becauſe it militated with the higher principle of eternal juſtice.

It was then, Fellow-Citizens, that THE CONVENTION PARLIAMENT of England publicly diveſted him of the authority which he had abuſed. A new and extraordinary evil was *then* deemed a ſufficient warrant for a new and extraordinary remedy. The Parliament *then* ſitting was adjudged incompetent to execute the important taſk; and as THE SAFETY OF THE PEOPLE IS THE SOVEREIGN LAW, ſo it ſurely was fitting, that the people ſhould have a ſhare, either perſonally or by deputy, in the making of the law, which, when made, they were bound to obey. To accompliſh this great object, and in order that the CONVENTION-PARLIAMENT might be a complete organ of the public will, that it might be an expreſs image of the feelings of the people, all thoſe who had ſitten in Parliament ſince the reſtoration of the Second Charles; in a word, all who, at any time, having obtained the confidence, might be ſuppoſed to expreſs the WILL of the people, were ſummoned to attend. Had our forefathers entrenched themſelves within the narrow forms, inſtead of being guided by the liberal

liberal ſpirit of legiſlation, the grievances of the people might have died away in uſeleſs murmurs, inſtead of being redreſſed by that important revolution, which opened the way for the acceſſion of the houſe of Hanover. In England, much time was conſumed in idle diſputation, while Scotland, eagerly graſping at the ſubſtance of liberty, and careleſs about the form in which ſhe might be arrayed, boldly pronounced, that the abuſe of truſt is itſelf a revocation of it, and that the king, by invading the rights, had thereby forfeited the allegiance of the people. At this auſpicious period, the liberties of Britain were, if not more enlarged, at leaſt more firmly ſecured, and more clearly defined, than they had been during the later ages of darkneſs and deſpotiſm.

The ſpirit of Alfred again aroſe to animate the councils of his regenerated country. Scotland, which had long groaned under the domination of an auſtere an inſolent ariſtocracy, was called in to ſhare with her brethren of England, the bleſſings of freedom, which ſhe had contributed to produce. Placemen and penſioners were excluded *by law* from the Houſe of Commons, leſt a ſenſe of their dependance on the crown ſhould, as it muſt, make them forgetful of their duty to the people. Parliaments were not to ſit for more

than three years, ſince power long continued is commonly abuſed, as thoſe entruſted with it, are too prone to forget the hand which gave, and the purpoſe for which it was given. Miniſters were made anſwerable for the counſels which they afforded, and the throne, now guarded by the vigilance, and ſuſtained by the love of all its ſubjects, was no longer a ſanctuary for the treachery of its ſervants.

FRIENDS AND COUNTRYMEN,

Theſe wiſe and wholeſome proviſions, which were once the boaſt and ſecurity of Britons, now from only an object of melancholy remembrance. They are buried in the ſame ſepulchre with the bodies of our anceſtors. In many Parliaments, which have ſitten ſince the revolution, placemen and penſioners have been ſo numerous, as to controul the will, while they violated the rights of the people. Since that time, Parliaments have more than doubled the term of their duration, not by an appeal to the voice of their electors, but by the arbitrary effort of a ſelf-conſtituted authority. Judging from this ſpecimen, and drawing the natural inference, that what *has* been done *may* be done again, we know of no barrier or ſecurity, at preſent exiſting, to prevent a future Parliament from enlarging the term of their duration to twenty years,

years, or, if it ſuits their intereſt or ambition, from declaring themſelves perpetual. The reſponſibility of miniſters has become an empty name. Crimes, which during former periods, would have called down upon the heads of their guilty authors, the juſt vengeance of an injured nation, have been only a paſſport to opulence and power. The people of Britain have ſeen the very miniſters who diſmembered the empire, ſquandered a hundred millions of money, and poured out the blood of more than a hundred thouſand of their fellow-ſubjects in a cruel and deſperate conteſt, again recalled into the confidence of their ſovereign, and loaded with the honors and emoluments of the empire.

Thus you behold, that the ſpirit of thoſe regulations, which the revolution produced, is fled, and what remains is only the dead carcaſe which encumbers the Statute Book. We now aſk, Who are thoſe, that are guilty of innovation? Is it that band of hirelings, to whom corruption is food, or is it we, who wiſh only to reſtore the principles of our Saxon anceſtors, which gave us freedom, and that ſacred compact which confirmed it at the revolution? If the foundations of the throne are ſhaken, are they ſhaken by Us, who ſeek only to replace it on thoſe ſolid grounds, on which it was

originally erected; or, are not they rather ſhaken by thoſe who, with hollow profeſſions of loyalty in their mouths, have ſought to eſtabliſh the authority of the crown, by the renovation of thoſe practices which baniſhed the Stuarts, and by the violation of thoſe principles which elevated the Brunſwicks? We cheriſh the conſtitution of our anceſtors, not as ſpeculative bauble, but as a practical good; and we contraſt, with an honeſt pride, our own ſincere admiration of that ſyſtem, with the fawning treachery of its real foes—of men, whoſe praiſe is profanation, and whoſe external homage is concealed blaſphemy.

THE ONLY OBJECTS OF OUR ASSOCIATION ARE THE RESTORATION OF ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS AND UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE. WE GO NO FURTHER.

From an authentic ſtatement of facts, which the moſt hardened audacity cannot deny, we have proved, that our principles are the ſame with the genuine principles of our conſtitution, and are grounded on the eſtabliſhed uſages of our forefathers. Theſe principles were drawn, and theſe uſages were adopted from the GREAT CHARTER of univerſal reaſon, of which the genius of freedom

freedom was the ſacred interpreter. The rights of man may be ſuſpended for a time by the outrages of a tyrant, they may be bound down by the parchment fetters of the law,—but the rights of men are, in their nature, inextinguiſhable. We agree with the enlightened hiſtorian,* that "the equal diſtribution of juſtice, and free enjoyment of property, are the great objects for which political ſociety was at firſt founded among men; which the people have a perpetual and unalienable right to recal; and which no time, nor precedent, nor ſtatute, nor poſitive inſtitution, ought to deter them from keeping uppermoſt in their thoughts and attention."

This principle, which we embrace as an object of our underſtanding, we are authoriſed to adopt as a rule of our conduct; and, as a right without a remedy is unknown in the code of reaſon and of freedom, ſo, in all caſes of oppreſſion, we are juſtified in applying the redreſs, whenever we have aſcertained the exiſtence of the evil.

FRIENDS AND COUNTRYMEN,

Our rights have the two-fold ſanction of reaſon and antiquity. We have ſeen, that the temple of

* Hume's Hiſt. England, vol. 3. Obſervation on Magna Charta.

Britiſh

Britiſh freedom is a Gothic fabric, which, reared, by the hands, and cemented by the blood of our anceſtors, is at once venerable for age, and reſpectable for utility. It is a ſtricture which we can claim as an inheritance from our fathers, who claimed it themſelves from the political patriarchs in the old time before them. But we knew, and we feel that the temple of freedom has yet a broader baſe, a deeper foundation, and a more remote antiquity. It is a palladium coeval with time itſelf, deſtined for the ſafe-guard of the whole human race, and dropped by the hand of WISDOM from the firmament of HEAVEN.

We have been aſked, what are our wiſhes? We anſwer, liberty, and the means of ſecuring it. But, can liberty be ſecure, if thoſe who are bound by the law, have no ſhare in the making of it;—no choice of thoſe who can alter, pervert, or annul it? The peace and ſecurity of a whole nation are objects far more important than the adminiſtration of juſtice to individuals. The power of all legitimate government is a *lodgement*, not a *gift*; we *truſt* much, but we *part* with nothing. The freedom of the people can only be ſafe in the hands of the people:—nor is it ſufficient for the people to *be* free; governments ſhould be ſo conſtituted, that they cannot be enſlaved. We ſay, in the words of

him

him who is now no more, but whoſe ſpirit is immortal, "Not only is that government tyrannical which is tyrannically adminiſtered, but every government is tyrannical, which has not a ſufficient guard againſt its being ſo adminiſtered.*

The means which we employed for the attainment of this end, were as conſtitutional, as the end itſelf, if obtained, would have been ſalutary. Truth was our only object, reaſon our only weapon. If the free exerciſe of the reaſoning faculties of man, which were given him by the Father of all goodneſs, to mend his heart, and enlighten his underſtanding, be cramped or proſcribed by the government of our country, we ſee not wherein the boaſted conſtitution of Britain differs from the deſpotiſm of Turkey or Algiers. To ſeek truth, and to ſpread it, are ſo eſſentially connected with our duty both to God and the world, that to deprive us of this invaluable right, under the pretext of reverence for eſtabliſhed government, or from a boaſted regard to the peace of ſociety, which all governments were only eſtabliſhed to ſecure, is both weak and wicked. Weak, becauſe it ſacrifices the end to the means; and wicked, becauſe it erects the tyranny of human inſtitutions on

* Fletcher of Saltoun.

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the ruins of the altars of the Deity, and extinguiſhes that flame, by whoſe DIVINE LIGHT we can alone aſcertain their value and their uſe.

In theſe our peaceful endeavours, we have been defamed by calumny, menaced by power, and at length aſſailed by open force. In our oppreſſed and beloved ſiſter country of Ireland, the forms of law were preſerved, though the principles of juſtice were violated. The meetings of the friends of parliamentary reform, the boldeſt ſupporters of deſpotiſm dared not to interrupt, until an act of the legiſlature had ſanctioned their uſurpation. It was the unhallowed voice of a venal Senate which chaunted the funeral dirge over the rights of three millions of people. That alone was the death-bell, which tolled the knell of their departed freedom.

MEN OF SCOTLAND,

Whoſe thinking habits, ſober manners, and ſteady valor, have rendered you an object of reverence among nations, advert to the ſcene which has of late taken place in the capital of your country. Your own deputies, together with the deputies of your brethren of the South, who came from a far diſtance with warm hearts, and outſtretched arms

to embrace you, who came to mourn over our mutual ſufferings, and to reſtore the principles of our violated conſtitution, were driven from their peaceful, their ſalutary, and conſtitutional meetings, by the appearance of an armed force, acting under the *ſemblance* of a legal authority. But at this awful criſis, we were not unmindful of the ſacred truſt which you had repoſed in us. Our intentions were pure: our hearts, therefore, were undaunted. Cultivating the maxims of the Prince of Peace, it was not by *us* that the kindred-blood of our fellow-men was endangered. *Under theſe circumſtances*, we deemed it our duty to delay the *immediate* proſecution, but, at the ſame time, reſolved to abandon only with our lives, the object of our aſſociation. Clad in the impenetrable armour of truth, the bayonet and the ſword have no terror for us; and while we reprobate an appeal to any mode of deciſion, which, though it may ſlay the body, cannot convince the mind, we feel a firm and unalterable conviction, (as the iſſue of our cauſe is in the hands of the Almighty,) that the liberties of the people will be ſolidly eſtabliſhed, and that truth and juſtice muſt ultimately triumph.

On all theſe proceedings, therefore, we look with regret, but we look without fear. As armed force

cannot appal our hearts, ſo *perſecution, under the colour of law*, ſhall not relax our efforts. If law ſhould be converted into an inſtrument of oppreſſion, we ſhall carry with us to our dungeons, a conſolation, of which our enemies cannot deprive us,—the tears of the compaſſionate, the approbation of the wiſe, and the prayers of all good men. And ſhould even death arreſt us in our honourable career, we ſhall enjoy a compenſation for the ſacrifice which we make—we ſhall be entombed in the hearts of a grateful people.

FRIENDS AND COUNTRYMEN,

Having now told you what are *our* principles, and what is *our* object, we call your attention to the principles, the conduct, and the object of thoſe aſſociations, which diſturb the peace of our country, under pretence of preſerving it. For ourſelves, we ſay—we have no intereſt diſtinct from yours—*we* do not ſervilely feed on the patronage of the great—we prey not on the ſpoils of an injured country—in *our* conduct, we are neither influenced by the corrupt hope of obtaining places, nor the ſlaviſh fear of loſing them. If ſuch be our ſentiments, and ſuch our ſituation, the friends of Britain muſt be our friends; and we can have no foes but thoſe who are the foes of freedom, the foes of our country, the foes of the human race. We will

will not degrade the dignity of reaſon by enquiring whether it be not as lawful for us to meet, and we may point out the means of *correcting* the abuſes of government, as it is for the penſioned paraſites of a court, and the members of rotten corporations to conſpire, that they may *preſerve* abuſes, becauſe they ſubſiſt by them.

We look down with contempt upon thoſe ſilly reflections, which ignorance and avarice have combined to throw upon thoſe uſeful and laborious occupations of life, which, while they contribute to the eaſe and comfort of the rich, are the ſolid pillars which ſupport the great fabric of ſociety. Yes, Countrymen, it is our pride and our boaſt, that this aſſociation conſiſts of the honeſt hands that bring forth the fruits of induſtry, and not of the uſeleſs mouths which conſume them. The peaſant and artificer, who earn their bread by the ſweat of their brow, are, in the eye of Him who is *no reſpecter of perſons*, objects of equal regard with the favored heir of fortune, whoſe opulence enables him to enjoy, what his diligence had not been exerted to obtain.

We have been ſcoffingly aſked, if the means of our information are greater than the means of thoſe whoſe principles we combat, and whoſe conduct

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we arraign. We anſwer, that we pretend not to greater, but to equal means of information; that intellect is the offspring of every ſoil, and that it is neither confined to courts, nor baniſhed from cottages. We know, that it is not in the polluted receſſes of luxury and vice, but under the humble roof of peace and meditation, that wiſdom, whoſe habits are ſimple, delights to abide; and we are aſſured by that ſacred authority which none can diſpute, that HE who is the parent of light, and fountain of knowledge, will impart it to all who diligently ſeek it.

The preſent ſituation of the people is awful and alarming to a degree hitherto unparalleled in the annals of Britain. It calls, therefore, for the vigilant attention, and active exertions of all who love her. While we are bending under a debt of more than THREE HUNDRED MILLIONS, and which the preſent ſyſtem of meaſures is ſtill further accumulating, or commerce languiſhes, our huſbandmen emigrate, and our manufacturers, through a want of employment, ſubſiſt not, as in the halcyon days of peace, by the honeſt earnings of their own induſtry, but on the ſcanty and precarious

bounty

bounty of the great.* We are engaged in a war with a powerful and enthuſiaſtic nation; of which we can neither trace the motive, and of which we ſhudder to contemplate the end. THE FRIENDS OF THE PEOPLE ASK BUT FOR PEACE. If we have errors, ours are the errors of humanity. No orphan mourns for his ſlaughtered ſire, no deſolate widow weeps tears of blood over the plans of *our* ambition. But we refrain.—From the wiſdom and the virtue of the people of Britain, we catch the hope of returning good. The picture which we have drawn is not overcharged. It is, as you all know, and too many of you feel, not a fiction of the imagination, but a repreſentation of FACTS. We have drawn it with reluctance; but to know our danger, is the firſt ſtep to avert it, and, at a criſis like the preſent, to flatter is to betray.

* Six thouſand poor weavers and their families were ſtarving in *one* pariſh of London, Spitalfields.—Can there be a ſtronger proof of the rottenneſs of any ſyſtem, than that in a country like England, ſix thouſand induſtrious men, who are both able and willing to work, ſhould, becauſe they could not procure any, be reduced to the melancholy neceſſity of ſtarving, or (a circumſtance goading to the ſpirit of freemen,) the ſtill more melancholy neceſſity of ſubſiſting on the *temporary* alms of the rich?

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To THAT BEING who ſees and pierces through all diſguiſes, who created the world by his power, who governs it by his wiſdom, and who upholds it by his providence, we make this ſolemn and public appeal, for the purity of the motives which actuate our conduct. Truth is the only ſtable foundation of all inſtitutions. As reaſoning beings, we are enabled to diſcover, and as moral agents, we are bound to diffuſe it. This principle, we know, like every valuable attribute of man, may be perverted in its practice, and proſtituted in its purpoſe; but we muſt ever regard the ſuppreſſion of the meetings of the people, (by the interference of power, however elevated) of which the guide is order, the object, knowledge, and the end, peace, as eſtabliſhing principles, and deducing conſequences, that muſt EXTINGUISH FOR EVER THE LIBERTIES OF OUR COUNTRY.

F I N I S.

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